CIA/Cocaine Link: Attorney Harland Braun and Robert Parry on KPFK (1996)

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CIA / COCAINE LINK / Produced by Ian Masters

pt.1: Harlan Braun is the prominent California defense attorney whose clients, LA sheriff officers busted a contra-drug rung in LA in 1986. Documents have just surfaced with Sheriff Block. Senator Tom Hayden wants these 3,500 documents released to the public.

Pt.2. Robert Parry, Editor of the Consortium for Independent Journalism who originated the Iran Contra sting for the AP, discusses the press cover-up of the Contra-cocaine story in South Central.

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[Music] welcome to background briefing I'm Ian masters today we'll look at one subject in the news or one subject that many would hope isn't in the news but still persists it's a story that has legs perhaps because much of it was broken on the internet which is a free form of publication I'm talking about the Contra cocaine in South Central Los Angeles story today we'll be joined by Colin brown who's a prominent local Los Angeles defense attorney and he'll be talking about his clients and they were key to this story a group of Los Angeles County sheriff's officers were arrested for skimming drug profits from confiscated raids they also took part in the raid in 1986 homes of members of an alleged drug-dealing ring that included done it but demillo Blandon State Senator Tom Hayden has written a letter to Sherman blocked the sheriff of Los Angeles in this letter he's asked in this letters of dated December the 3rd so he's expecting a senator Hayden expecting a reply next week from Sherman block but however the sheriff after having said that there were no papers associated with this raid available have now reinvestigated this 1986 raid and have turned up 3500 pages and quoting from Senator Hayden's letter in light of previous statements that no records were recovered from the raid and a general public suspicion regarding the saga these documents may reveal answers to Troublesome questions that will not go away so be looking into those troublesome questions we'll also be joined by Robert Perry who is the editor

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joined by Robert Perry who is the editor of the consortium for independent journalism he is the reporter originally when he was working for The Associated Press AP he broke the around Congress story and much of this story that is persisted in terms of the connection between South Central Los Angeles and the Contras and under the broad heading of CIA and drugs which will be the subject for today let's now go to Harlan Brown I'm speaking with Harlan Brown as a prominent Los Angeles defense attorney and back in 1986

Harlan Brown there was a raid conducted by the mages two unit of the LA Sheriff's Office and you handled the subsequent trial of the defendants tell me how the case came to you well the Mike particular client was a deputy sheriff that charted me when I was a prosecutor and one of some of the Manson family when I was a young prosecutor so he came to me I figured I owed him a defense but what happened was that the sheriff's basically were systematically stealing money from drug dealers and they finally got caught by a federal sting I think but it turned out that well but when you're the defendant Daniel Ghana came to you did he not say that it's okay we've got a an type defenses yeah the or not only Dan garner but all the sheriffs assumed that the federal government wouldn't come after him for these relatively minor thefts because they get under covered the connection between the drug traffickers and the CIA in the 1986 did search I see so essentially they felt that they had an immunity right a naively so I mean this they even though they were experienced police officers they just didn't understand that the federal government one arm can do one thing and another arm won't know about it or just simply deny it so they just thought that they had them in a box which they obviously did not but out of that raid

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obviously did not but out of that raid that the sheriff's did copy some of these seized documents at the homes of the milord bland on who is who is a major figure in the story that was broken by the San Jose Mercury News and has subsequently been covered by other okay they understood the significance of it right immediately and they had the foresight to copy some of the documents because surely after the raid the everything was taken away by some federal officers who showed up at the sheriff's station they did maintain these documents and they thought these would be almost give immunity for subsequent prosecutions these these ten pages that were referring to now you gave copies to had it what happened the LA Times got what happened was that I tried to go public with the idea that the of the CIA drug connection as part of a defense the prosecution the US government I asked them for a letter saying it did not occur and then I would put it into it they simply put an s4 in order to gag me I put the documents into the course under seal and I give a copy to the LA Times hoping that they would work on it they never did anything with it five of the pages disappeared ironically but had simply subsequently been recovered by the Sheriff's Department those are the direct papers from Lister listing various CIA agents and connections now Aleister was one of the people rated in in in in this by this unit majors too you know the Sheriff's Department in conjunction with the Nicaraguan the drug dealer Danilo Blandon Lister is a retired Laguna Beach identified himself to the sheriff's as a CIA operative they allowed him to call to it in they recovered a number of documents that would indicate that in fact the the directions for the sheriff's even before they met Lister said that this was a contra operation

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said that this was a contra operation bringing drugs into in order to raise money for the war in Nicaragua there was no question about what was going on and the sheriff's knew it and the FBI was part of the 86 raid so I don't know why people are all so surprised about this connection well I believe that the FBI documents concerning that 1986 raid when the first break that the reporter from the San Jose Mercury News Gary Webb garden when he did afraid of information search so they probably dug it up yeah you know it's it's interesting because when you listen to the denials right now I mean you have to listen very carefully to what's being said and and the denials and I'm and I have a very I didn't and I'm not an activist in this area I just got in and once the case was over I get out of it and then just start out by various reporters and my involvement you listen to the denials there very carefully coughs like the CIA inspector general say we do not have any evidence that any CIA agents were directly involved with drug dealing well that of course is an admission because what they're simply saying is what about what happened of course is pretty clear as you had Contras begin to deal in drugs in order to circumvent the ban on money you had CIA agents knowing about it looking the other way or perhaps you know assisting them indirectly that's really the issue I don't think anyone thinks that in Washington there was a a decision made to sacrifice South Central LA to save Nicaragua the question was like Watergate did you get sucked in afterwards and either a cover-up or aiding them and I think it's pretty clear it occurred indeed in the meeting in in watts recently that where the the now departing director of

Central Intelligence John Dodge in in in making that statement there was actually a preface he said at this time there's no that was even more second spec than the way you view we're dealing with some other agency but this is called the Central Intelligence Agency they're supposed to keep track of what's going

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supposed to keep track of what's going on in the entire world and behind what was then the Iron Curtain and we're only asking on what was going on in your own agency so it should not be a it should not take weeks to figure out what they were doing no I mean obviously and I understand there's a reluctance to admit now in 1996 what occurred in 86 but what I may just say yes you know where it was it was a cold war we were fighting it we made some decisions and we allowed some of our allies dealing drugs and we made a decision we wanted to win the Cold War it's a tough world out there you know we did win the Cold War hey we used Nazi rocket scientists to fight the Cold War right after World War two no one denies that now and those decisions were made no one says we shouldn't have brought Wernher von Braun over here and let him go to the Russians you know the decisions are made in war were hot and people just admit it and get on with it let me just provide the audience again if I may I'm speaking with Holland Brown who was a prominent Los Angeles defense attorney who handled a case involving a group of LA Sheriff's Office's known as mages - they were anti Narcotics squad and they raided a series of homes in in Los Angeles in 1986 where a lot of material relating to the Contras was found they approached the the main defendant Daniel Ghana the sheriff's deputy approached you Harlan Brown to defend him and basically saying look we're okay the CIA is involved and that proved to be naive on his part ten pages however he had the presence of mind to copy some of this confiscated material and this ten pages you turned it over Harlan Brown you turned over to judge Edward rafidhi you also turned over the same ten pages to a Los Angeles Times reporter Victor morena right and now we get to a new stage in this story which is one of the reasons I'm talking

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which is one of the reasons I'm talking to you Harlan is I have a letter here from State Senator Tom Hayden to Sherman blocked the sheriff's of the County of Los Angeles dated December the 3rd and in this letter he he Tom Hayden says I was pleased to see your recent statement that the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department is reinvestigating the 1986 raid by an anti-drug unit on the homes of members of an alleged drug-dealing ring that included demillo bland on I am concerned however that the interested public is being refused access to some 3,500 pages of information that you have announced your forwarding to congressional investigator I urge you to disclose these 300 and 3,500 pages to the public in an accessible way now what how come we see what concerns me actually five of those pages are most critical that I know about the the five pages that we're missing those are the written pages from Lister showing you know actually they mentioned Iran they mentioned a number of things have the recovered copies have been recovered by the Sheriff's Department they've been shown to my client to identified them as the same documents and they're now in that packet given to the federal government now they were either fakes or they're genuine if you know in other words it's possible that the guy like Lister who tries to disguise himself as a CIA agent or work with the CIA and be it the dope dealer on the side and use documents like this to try to protect themselves or they're genuine it should be easy to determine I mean very quickly now the fact that they're being withheld now when they've been talked about so publicly indicates to me that they may very well be genuine and that they this does show a link that actually it may involve the Iran to mmm well now York you're a client Daniel Gardiner he was shown these these papers that resurfaced stuff initially the Sheriff's Department said that they had no record of this now and

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that they had no record of this now and then congresswoman Maxine Waters went down to the sheriff's office and demanded the release of papers now they were they didn't have those but now they do have them now I suspect the where they came from is that some of they share other sheriff's an addition to garner had kept copies of these same documents for the same reason the Carnage's thinking it was installation from a

prosecution and they then turned them over these sheriff's or copies over these sheriff's investigators but now they're critical to get at them I mean if they're fakes let's expose him as fakes and if they're genuine let's know what's going on now there's another issue my clients seized about 60 million dollars worth of drug money here in Los Angeles in a very in a relatively short period of time that money was turned over the federal government and the testimony for trial was that the money was wired out back to the drug cartel you know as I told the the Senate the house investigators all we have to do is to trace that money if that money went to the US Treasury there is no problem because that's where that money should have gone if that 60 million dollars went somewhere else the question is why why is it going to the drug cartel or why is he going to offshore banks or why is it buying guns in Europe so it's a very simple thing follow the money and they seem to want to they refuse to do that that particular story about where the money went may actually be more important than this CIA drug connection because what may have happened is not the CIA but the main federal government was rate was involved in drug trafficking here using that money for other purposes well it's also worth noting Harlan Brown that that freeway Rick Ross whose trial to some extent brought this story out he continued dealing for many years after Blandon was arrested over here his house was raided in this 1986 raid right and he was blendin blandin

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right and he was blendin blandin apparently was his main supplier what happens of course is you you see the thief the the feds the federal agencies and the local sheriff's were grabbing money in order to confiscate it to use it for their own purposes particularly federal government this was like off the books money and what happens of course if you have a successful one-year you've wiped out the drug dealers haven't you if you the only way you're almost like a herdsman calling or heard the only way to really make money is to only take down so much of the money and allow the other drug-dealing to continue because that's what genuine generates the money I think what happened this is that this forfeiture laws that degenerated into actual participation by the US government and local officials and drug dealing in the sense that they had to allow the drugs to come in to generate the money they had to allow a certain number the dealers to operate they wouldn't take down the money couriers now you understand that in the 60 million dollars that my client seized and the hundreds of money couriers that they intercepted they never arrested one drug courier now that is undisputed they were under orders that if the drug courier would find a piece of paper saying that this is not my money they were to be released now what do you think happened what do you think the drug dealers thought when these couriers were showing up without sixty million dollars mmm they say there was a there was something very nefarious here going on either there was a unspoken alliance between the US government and lon horsemen and the drug dealers that you know we let you operate so we can make money whether there was a Express deal now where did that 60 million dollars go and why weren't these money couriers all arrested those are very simple questions and the answer that will read honest answer will give us a definition of what was going on here 10 years ago but Harlan Brown you're a fairly experienced defense attorney you're involved in the

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defense attorney you're involved in the Rodney King case you turned down the Simpson case you know you know your way around I mean would you be comfortable having all of these documents that have resurfaced that originally were not supposed to exist now this 3,500 pages involved are you comfortable them going to the house investigators given that the chairman of the of the of the House Select Committee on Intelligence Larry comm best he just along with the CIA they just stripped a State Department officer of his security clearances because he told the truth to the Congress so here you have the head of the congressional committee punishing as a government official for telling the truth to the cop to the Congress so as far as I'm concerned I'm sort of a cynical only person I mean in a sense look it took five years or for the veterans white veterans basically or at least a number of white veterans and powerful conservative groups to dig out of the government the fact that there was a huge amount of physical injuries done to the troops and the Iraqi war took five years with tremendous conservative pressure now what's the chance that Maxine Waters and the african-american activists in South Central LA will able to dig this out of the federal government probably

close to zero because though it happened it's not really in the government's interest to admit that it happened I mean someone should make a decision that maybe it's better just to let it come out all at once and get it over with and to let this thing drip drip drip for the next ten years but you know given the government's patter and I think they will probably go into their denial mode and of course the problem they have is like they look at these five pages we're talking about there is another shoe couple sheriff's out there the probably have copies of them so if they don't make them public they're gonna get public anyway so I just haven't you know we'll just have to see how you know the

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we'll just have to see how you know the way it works itself out and the and these five pages in this this ten pages that that you have seen and that your client Daniel Garner was recently shown in order to verify that they were the same as the original ten they include diagrams of the roots of the drug money the laundering process outside the United States they I'm just quoting here from Senator Hayden's letter of December the third to Sherman block the sheriff of the county of los angeles and and i it senator Hayden told me that he expects a reply this week from from Sherman the documents I mean look at what's the problem there either genuine or they're fakes let's find out I mean I I've seen the documents I can't swear that they're that they're genuine because you have to know the background who the names belong to to verify them or they're fakes their lists are trying to use some guise of being a CIA operative in order to protect his drug dealing either way it's a simple with the decision determination let's find out whether they're fakes or not if they're fakes then there's a whole different cast if it's they're not fake so then there's a direct CIA drug link mmm-hmm and what any of these is not gonna use so Hollen Brown when they when they stamp secret no no no no these were there for half of them were the five pages were the pages that were not did not disappear from judge Murphy T's Court they were the the operative directions for the search warrant which the Sheriff's Department 86 at this is the Contras bringing drugs in to support the war this is an end that there was an FBI were participated in these raids the other five pages were the missing ones which have now been recovered which were handwritten documents recovered from Lister mm-hmm and you and you don't have any idea what the 3,500 pages are no uh I mean probably most of its garbage if I know the Sheriff's Department but you know they're maybe three four hundred pages of interesting pages they did through everything for the kitchen sink

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through everything for the kitchen sink in there right but but the bottom line is that these pages are it is the intention as as of this moment that the sheriff will send these on to the congressional investigators which I understand isn't that the House Select Committee on Intelligence I think so you know I had heard these sheriffs asked my client to keep it secret that these documents were recovered and he said well at least have to tell my lawyer which and so they asked him to keep it secret for a week so we know he told me and we basically kept a secret for a week but I alerted the AG the investigators who I had met with who seem to be two Republicans and two Democrats that came to my office to question me about the this link I alerted them sort of secretly cuz I wanted to make sure that they knew the documents were coming and they didn't disappear mmm but the other than that it wasn't made public what would these investigators there and there's another there's there are three investigations this is a select House Committee on Intelligence there was more investigators and here all lawyers so it's not Brum Brum which of the I mean I don't know I mean I don't have my office right now but they gave me their cards but there's two Republicans and two Democrats they work for the House Select Committee right and and as I pointed out they were working out Julian Dixon's office right so it's hard to know but I just I was there is also an in Justice Department investigation headed up by Bromwich Oh probably useless I mean in 1990 I gave this stuff this stuff was available to the US Attorney's Office here I specifically asked him just write me a letter one page letter saying that there's no connection and they refused to do it and they basically were part of the cover-up so the Justice Department is particularly useless mm-hmm today also the problem they're sending kids to prison for life for small amounts of crack cocaine so for them to come in and now admit that the US government was involved in the very drug trafficking that they are maintaining is moralistic

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that they are maintaining is moralistic position is somewhat inconsistent well what do you expect since you've really earlier a little cynical about matters that may trip you know I mean the it would on the almost a miracle that the government would just come out and tell the truth and we'll get it over where that's fairly inconsistent with their pattern so I think it'll probably happen it'll take us several years for the thing to be finally drugged out and the problem of course just like the OJ case this thing is doing horrendous damage to the race relations in this country because the reluctance of the government and this mealy-mouthed approach is just exacerbating I mean if they were just going to take a look at this is what happened in 1986 the Contras got involved in drug trafficking we had CIA agency there looking the other way or assisting it the truth is is that the CIA or Contra drug connection had it was a Smith school amount of the crack that was coming in I mean it did not cause the the crack epidemic it would have happened anyway it was a small part of it but their failure to admit it is making it seem as if they started it and and we were the major portion of it mmm so what the damage that's being done to the government's credibility right now is worse than the damage that would be done by admitting the truth but who in the government ever has the courage to make that decision but what is your just as an observer Harlan Brown what's your sense of the reaction in the press in in them it's been very interesting because it's almost as if the Washington Post was a running dog for the CIA the LA Times tried to do a cover story pooh-poohing me San Jose and if but if you read the LA Times story very carefully again it was just like the CIA denials they kept 'miss phrasing the issue the issue isn't whether the CIA in Washington decided to bring drugs in from Nicaragua or from the Central America into LA the issue was whether did the Contras begin to do it and at

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did the Contras begin to do it and at the CIA look the other way or condone it and they will not answer that question because you can't answer the only answer is of course it occurred so The Times I think is embarrassed by their the fact they had the story in 1990 and blew it and then they're embarrassed by the fact that the San Jose paper is the one who broken so at the LA story was almost like attack on the San Jose paper rather than a an investigation into the truth but did did for example he since you and the attorney for the sheriff's involved in in in this raid that and everyone came out and talked to me I mean it was interesting really report I never talk to any of the reporters that did that story you know one of the local guys called me and asked me whether Dan garner would be available which he couldn't write and be right now but none of them came out and to try to track it down and all it was almost like they were afraid in you notice nowhere in the story does it say that I gave these two judgement CD into one of their own reporters hmm does it mean you would think that they would you know at least would admit it and and and these documents you guy were not classified documents and there's no no no no they were the the five pages were the the commands to the to the sheriff's in 1986 of which there is no question of the authenticity and we and it shows exactly what the sheriff's knew in 1986 which was this is the contras bringing drugs into support the war in Nicaragua at the FBI is party to those raids so those were I mean that is it those were those themselves are actually the most devastating documents and these these these are such wanted documents yeah another one I mean so those are there's not even a question of their authenticity that's why the Lister handwritten documents was just been recovered or actually you know there is could be some questions about their authenticity but the papers that are in existence have always shown that the

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existence have always shown that the sheriff's and the FBI and 86 knew that the Contras are bringing drugs into here they knew it and they put it in the such water that's right well Harlan Brown I thank you very much yes and I say I have this letter here a copy of this letter dated December the 3rd last week to Sherman block by Senator Tom Hayden asking for for the these 3,500 pages to be released to the public senator Hayden is the one who got me involved and it's apparently one of the year one of the more obscure newspaper articles from 1990 used my name about the CIA and then he dug that out I know some of his research people and then I was able to pull the motion off of my computer because of the and that's we how we started to dig

that's how actually I had almost forgotten about I just you know once the case was over I went on to another case I'm not really a political activist in any sense right well I thank you very much because doesn't say this this is the story that that is not going away and I think names yes maybe a lot of people would like it to go away I think so yeah it's very embarrassing I mean it's sort of like being I mean I sort of analogize it's like the Nazi stories after world war two we made particular decisions about using Nazis for our own purposes and we when we took years to admit it and in a way the government was at a war and I don't really have a huge disagreement I mean if they had said if they would just come out said hey look guys we were fighting for our lives that was we perceived it we thought were losing Central America and we made decisions to use drugs to fight communists I mean I'm not the person I'm not going to go crazy over that I'm not gonna second-guess people 10 years later right well it's just it's just the 10 years later we haven't we have a crack epidemic and Sandinistas there are but you see the interesting thing is that that's the other thing is that I don't think this cause the Krakken like the that belief

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cause the Krakken like the that belief is only a result of the government sort of disinformation that their turnout trying to put out which then allows the most wild speculation to gained credence so the government's truly doing itself a disservice with this kind of dishonesty once again I thank you for joining us in the census okay thank you thank you for having me hello again I'm Ian Masterson are just speaking then with Harlan Brown has a prominent Los Angeles defense attorney and he was the attorney for the sheriff's the leader of the sheriffs group that derated these houses back in 1986 that uncovered these documents and as he mentioned he handed over copies to a federal judge into the Los Angeles Times back at the in 1990 and this case has been reinvestigated by Sheriff Sherman block and on December the 3rd of last week Senator Tom Hayden sent a letter to Sherman Bloch asking that these these 3,500 pages that had resurfaced in this new investigation be handed over to the public rather than sent on to Washington to the House Select Committee on Intelligence I'm now speaking with Robert Perry who is the editor of the Consortium for independent journalism and he's formerly reported with the Associated Press and then he went on to Newsweek and you're also the head of the nation's investigative team Robert what you didn't have the benefit listening to to Harlan Brown but essentially he he's sort of perplexed that this story has been sitting around since 1990 and in the instance has been revisited since the Gary Webb articles still nobody has talked to him what's your sense on on on this disconnect between the internet between this reporter up in San Jose who broke this story and the rest of the

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broke this story and the rest of the media that seemed to be quite hostile towards her well I think it goes back as a history to this story like there often is the and in the way you have to go back to the beginning of the 1980s when the Reagan administration made such an effort on behalf of the Contras the Nicaraguan Contras and in the effort to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua and as the Reagan administration internally described it in there we know in not we know other documents on some of their what they call public diplomacy the idea was to glue white hats on the Contras and to glue black hats on the Sandinistas through kind of public to public relations techniques so whenever the Contras would come under scrutiny for human rights violations or any any kinds of political problems the Reagan administration would try to clean them up discredit the witnesses attack the reporters who might be digging out the stories try to intimidate Congress if they were looking into these areas and that became the name of the game so when the Contra drug story first came came onto the scene and December of 85 when when Brian Barger and I wrote the piece for The Associated Press that was that was the way the Reagan administration responded it was trying to at that point get more money for the Contras more military aid the CIA had been stopped by Congress from being involved with the Contras for a year or two at that point and the Reagan administration wanted to bring the CIA back in if you remember Oliver North was sort of running the program in the interim so the idea was how can you discredit these allegations it was the idea should have been I think how can you stop these crimes from going forward that is the importation of cocaine into into the United States but

instead the Reagan administration thought it was most important to just stop the story in its tracks so there were a number of Lies told then there were efforts to discredit Senator John Kerry when he tried to investigate this issue in 86

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tried to investigate this issue in 86 and as he continued his effort through the spring of 89 he was under constant criticism in during much of this period the washington press corps having been bludgeoned over the Contras for a number of years swung more and more interline with the Reagan administration position the Washington Post in The New York Times joined the editorial support for the Contras by the mid to late 80s and we saw we saw a consensus build in Washington for the Contras even as the evidence of serious criminal wrongdoing was coming out and of course the iran-contra scandal breaks in the fall of 86 and many of those problems arms Export Control violations obstruction of justice and so forth became known in a certain a certain way through the hearings and investigations but always there was the effort to contain the damage to protect the Contras so Washington has sort of dealt with this issue it's been a very bitter almost personal controversy inside the beltway for you for a decade now and the people who won that battle were the people who wanted to protect the Contras who went along with the PR schemes the reporters in investigators who tried to tell the truth were largely pushed aside discredited they lost jobs and they've been subjected to a lot of ridicule so that was where the game ended really let's say after the Noriega trial where more of this even came out but was still rough was still basically ignored by the washington press corps then Gary Webb in the San Jose Mercury News come bouncing along in 1996 and put this story out about the effects of the Contra drug trafficking or at least some of the effects of Contra drug trafficking in Los Angeles and they put the information out on the on the internet which is considered kind of a challenge to the Washington news media for its for

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Washington news media for its for dominance of what is to be believed in this country so it had many it had many red flags attached to it and the Washington news media first of all tried to ignore it they just sustained this story but then after that didn't work and then the black community was very engaged and very upset and there was a controversy a controversy building around the story itself then the Washington news media first The Washington Post and The New York Times in the LA Times the big media just landed on it attacked it blasted it out of the water if you will tried to find anything wrong with it they could to discredit the the larger question which was that the that the Contras had been involved in drug trafficking substantially and the Washington news media had failed in its responsibilities to the American people to to warn them of that kind of problem that is something the washington press corps doesn't want to admit any more than the government wants to admit that that it had tolerated drug trafficking by people tied to the Contra movement well Perry had but let's just try and figure out what what's going on here what since when is the press being flax for the government and why why is that this currently if I'm to accept what you're saying why is this confluence of interest between a government that may be embarrassed by its actions and press who's I mean what's the complicity here what are they getting out of it well basically the reporters who moved ahead who got the good jobs were now the bureau chiefs in Washington or the deputy managing editor those mid-level news executives got to where they got by ignoring and putting down this story in the 80s the reporters who looked at it tried to examine it honestly were punished and pushed out there was a tremendous amount of pressure brought to bear on the Washington press corps in

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bear on the Washington press corps in the 80s not to report critically of the Contras it was Ronald Reagan's pet initiative it was madhva Ned described the Contras as the moral equals of the founding fathers if you remember so whenever any negative publicity came out there were teams set up at the State Department inside the NSC who would go and browbeat editors browbeat correspondents there was a case with the National Public Radio when NPR put out a show about a contra massacre of some farm workers and the

story was entirely accurate but it led to a trip by the public diplomacy team had by headed by Otto Reich at that point over to NPR offices and they sat down and basically browbeat members of the NPR staff over there and because the government had some control over the NPR funding the foreign editor whose in Paul Allen was ousted people were losing jobs over over their efforts to tell the truth about these issues and that and that has a very telling effect on any any community and it's in the Washington press corps it's a relatively small community so when you start seeing you start seeing that happen and with the level of nasty attacks that were being directed from the conservative media particularly against individual reporters from the Washington Times from the New Republic from the from the Wall Street Journal editorial page etc etc etc it became very hard to sustain serious and and hard-hitting investigations of the Contras and people stopped and having stopped or having been purged from the process that left behind those who who had actually survived because they had not done their jobs and we and we ended up seeing this among other stories being falling through the cracks

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stories being falling through the cracks so in essence you're saying that the government is essentially promoting people in the news media by by favoring them and demoting people by disfavoring them well it's not quite that simple I mean but it's to understand how Washington journalism works these days it's a bit like that that kid's game laser tag and if you you know that's where you have like a gun that shoots light and you have like a sensor on your chest and and you can get once or twice or a few times but at certain point the buzzers go off and you're dead well that's a bit like how it is and now when you have all these groups accuracy in media Brent Bozell is group The Wall Street Journal editorial page American Spectator just literally scores of conservative publications when when when when a reporter would write critically about the Contras that reporter would come under fierce attack and after a while his editors would say hey listen this isn't worth it we're taking too many hits and people would stop or if they didn't stop they wouldn't work anymore let me remind the audience again if I may that I think it was Robert Perry who is the editor of the Consortium for independent journalism he was formerly with The Associated Press from 1974 to 1985 with Newsweek from 1987 to 90 and he's also now working for the nation magazines investigative unit he's a head of that and we're talking about going back to the sort of the genesis of this story of the iran-contra story in the press and its evolution into this news story about the Contra cocaine connection in the South Central Los Angeles and there's no question in my mind Robert Perry about the about the your assertion that the Reagan administration had a highly sophisticated damage control team out there operating under the aegis of public diplomacy in fact my former partner in this program who was previously the head of

00:40:00 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEJgPBCf5QY&t=2400s)

program who was previously the head of the Los Angeles World Affairs Council he went to the State Department in that period as a deputy undersecretary of state and that was his job and he quit because he couldn't stand literally couldn't live with himself lying about the Contras so there's no question about that it's just it's the other part of it that I've said that I'm trying to pin down is the extent to which it worked I mean I would say the I would say in this may differ from what people in the operation may have felt but the public diplomacy operation was highly successful and was highly successful cuz have isolated the handful of reporters who were trying to tell the truth about this area and elected them to a lot of attacks let me ask you though about didn't when you originally broke the alley north around contra story you had a hard time getting that one and it sort of slipped out by mistake didn't know the course all these stories were very hard because they're only a few organizations really pushing them Associated Press where I was was doing a lot of it because I was leading that investigation the Miami Herald was doing some very good work but the big papers had were just avoiding this and that some of that goes back to the experience of Raymond Bonnar was a New York Times correspondent in Central America who was targeted for his reporting about death squads and I'll Salvador and he was run out of the New York Times and that sent a chilling message right through the press corps so by the time we got to the 8485 period when I was looking at Oliver North's

operation the news executives knew this was a dangerous area to go into but but I must say we were able to push out very careful stories about Oliver North then when we got to the contra drug allegations which we encountered in the fall of 85 Brian Barger and I did go down to Miami and then down to Central America to

00:42:00 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEJgPBCf5QY&t=2520s)

and then down to Central America to investigate this and came back with the story we had information from the contours from there from their backers from DEA officials we had some documentation from Central America we had a good deal of information already and it was a solid story at that point but when and it went through the editing process at the AP and was cleared for approval we thought um so when I sent it in to the general desk at in Washington I popped up on a computer for the for the bureau chief I mean he took it into his office and made a final call to New York where the AP is run and and there were sudden they were suddenly cold feet and he called me in and said well I'm not sure we're gonna be able to do this you'll have to you know do a lot more reporting and so forth so on however simultaneously the story had also shown up on a computer for the foreign desk which is another branch of the AP and they were not aware of the political problems that we're developing around the story so they they simply translated the story into Spanish and moved it out on the Spanish language wire so a couple days later someone called Brian Barger who was standing next to me and saying gee it was a great story you guys had on contra drugs and Barger just went very pale and said what are you talking about and it turned out that we discovered that there didn't this in a sense a mistake made and then AP had AZ redouble our efforts and I think the next day we ran the story out on the National wires for the AP let me just remind the audience again if I may that I'm speaking with Robert Peary who is the editor of the Consortium for independent journalism Pete Berg's original iran-contra story when he was working for The Associated Press back in 1985 and he subsequently worked for Newsweek and he's now with with the Nation magazines investigative unit and we're talking about the story that won't go away although there does seem to be a considerable constituency that would we should go away it's interesting yeah the previous guest Harlan Brown basically

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previous guest Harlan Brown basically thinks the government is really going to be eventually embarrassed by this and by by this is a drip drip drip of information and by these denials that they'll eventually they've making it actually worse he made the analogy with the the Gulf War veterans the government denied there are any problems and of course subsequent to that they've had to admit there's a lot more people affected and now they've admitting it that the pages of field reports from those particular days when the Iraqi bunkers were blown up of gone missing but he also rather Perry brought out something that I thought was pretty extraordinary he thought was a much harder lead for a journalist to follow up on that is that the sheriff's unit out here that were raided blendin's house and other houses and of course the the FBI reports on those raids became the first lead I think of when a substantial leads that Gary Webb got when he got a freedom of information search back he said that these sheriff's who were his clients they were skimming there's no question about that he said but they basically confiscated sixty million dollars here locally and he says in court s to me that that money was supposedly wired back to the drug cartels and he feels that somebody ought to look into whether in fact that confiscated money went into the US Treasury or went somewhere else well it sounds like an interesting story I think the there there are a lot of interesting leads on this the problem has been that the the atmosphere in which they're pursued is so poisonous 'men Washington and I think people outside of Washington do not quite grasp how nasty the city can be on stories like this yeah I was just going back I was on the West Coast you know as you know for a few days last week and I was I'd come back and flipping through some of the Washington Post The New York Times I hadn't stored up here and there was a piece in The Washington Post Style section which is

00:46:01 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEJgPBCf5QY&t=2761s)

Washington Post Style section which is sort of the chic section which sort of helps set the pecking order in Washington and and there was a long piece about bad information and how dangerous that is and it included Gary Webb story as a good example of bad information it must be must protect ourselves from and it was all done in this kind of ridiculing tone which is very intimidating for people in Washington no one wants to be laughed at in a place like this so it's very hard to get editors to pursue it and it's very hard I think even in Congress for Congress people to put their careers on the line and being made fools out of so so people haven't pursued it for those kinds of reasons I think as much as any other obviously the people in the government that want to keep these things secret try to encourage those those attitudes and that fear but it's how it works the world about what about Larry camp combats the new Republican head of the House Select Committee on Intelligence he's the fellow that these 3,500 pages of documents apparently been sent to by Sheriff Locke and just on December the 3rd State Senator Tom Hayden wrote Sherman block a letter it was from which he's expecting a reply this coming week urging him to hand these puppies pages over to the public but if if they're going to Larry combust he's he's just he along with the CIA have fired or have removed the the clearance of a State Department officer frag nausea and for telling the truth to the Congress I mean I find it extraordinary that a member of the United States Congress is punishing a member of the government for telling them the truth and going along with the agency I mean I the fact that that nunzio's career would be ruined without

00:48:01 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEJgPBCf5QY&t=2881s)

nunzio's career would be ruined without a clearance gives you an idea of how this game is played clearly the CIA has a lot more power than people think in Washington simply because it's the lure of being in the know obviously if congressmen wanted want to be nice to them because they don't to be cut off and if if government employees can't function without access to their information that would indicate to me that they've got they've got some power and I guess reporters that's even more obvious if they can be fed stuff well we make animated a careers right right well in case of an NCO who was a State Department official who blew the whistle on on the Guatemalan death squad activity which the CIA CIA had known about and had been lying to Congress about what it knew none CEO told a member of Congress that he was being misled and and and that member of Congress bob torricelli then went public with some of this information and but the guy who gets really nailed for this is none co and what the message that sends in Washington's as I say is a fairly small tight community the message that sends is that if you're a State Department official wanting to sort of blow the whistle on on some lying and deception you do so at the risk of your entire career your abilities to support your family and journalists have learned pretty much the same thing that if they get targeted by the the in this case the allies of the Reagan Bush administration's who are particularly Rosslyn Aysen when they come after you with with all kinds of smear campaigns pretty soon you you know you can't you can't work in this town there's kind of sort of an informal blacklist almost so people are aware of that they're aware of it as as anyone's aware of how organizations really function internally as opposed to maybe how they supposedly function on the outside there's that knowledge of what's dangerous what's

00:50:02 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEJgPBCf5QY&t=3002s)

knowledge of what's dangerous what's what hurts your career and it's clear to people that they're trying to take on the CIA over allegations like these drug trafficking allegations by the Contras is extremely hazardous to your career health if you remember when when John Kerry Senator John Kerry did a very good investigation that investigation not only exposed the contra drug trafficking but it zeroed in on Manuel Noriega this is back in 89 before our invasion of Panama it also opened the door into the BCCI scandal was a very important investigation when it came out as a report in April of 89 the Washington Post buried on a page a 20 in a dismissive 700 word article by my kiss cough that was a treatment received in general at Newsweek John Kerry was was was labeled a a Randy conspiracy buff this is the kind of tone and treatment that that people get when they try to dig out the truth and so after a while people realize hey this is a is awfully dangerous and if I want to watch out for my career and making and making a decent living I better not get into those areas and I think that explains a lot of why the washington press corps has has attacked so harshly the San Jose Mercury Peace and Gary Webb personally even though nobody's actually I mean

obviously it's easy to refute the thesis that the CIA peddle drugs on street corners in South Central I which of course the San Jose Mercury News never said but no an awful lot of what we're seeing here is you'll in a this was repeated in this Val section piece I mentioned it's this well the the San Jose Mercury News implied that the that the CIA peddle drugs on street corners and that's so laughable and and so what the media has been doing has been setting up straw men in terms of pretending to say what the San Jose Mercury didn't say and then and then

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Mercury didn't say and then and then bashing the heck out of that straw man so III guess I guess I was a bit surprised going back to your earlier point about will this in a way come out now I was a bit surprised at the intensity of the Washington news media's defense of of the Contras over the drug trafficking even though if you read those stories closely now the Washington Post and other publications are saying well yes the Contras were involved in drug trafficking in the 1980s but the the Fen Jose Mercury piece was overstated that's kind of basically the bottom line of what they say that then didn't get interpreted to being that all the story's been debunked and I and and that has been so strong a message that it's going to be very hard I think for it for members of Congress for the for people from California or from the Washington area or for any anyone outside the government and outside the media to really demand clear firm answers to these to these issues I think it's possible and I think it certainly would be a positive trend if that kind of public pressure forced a final admission at least at least a partial admission of what's been going on for the last ten years and what's been covered up for that long well I think it also indicates at least to me Robert Peary a broader issue and that is the extent to which the mainstream powerful press the the the the press that shapes opinions that's the times the post in the LA Times perhaps have gotten too comfortable with the government over the years which certainly for a a conservative is appalling I mean that's why I find people like Larry kumkum bass to be so despicable because of the the Republican conservative Republican rhetoric about getting big government off your back I mean here he is bending over for the government and so I'm my

00:54:03 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEJgPBCf5QY&t=3243s)

over for the government and so I'm my sense is that that you have to just say thank God for the internet because it's so pervasive and so free that it's an alternative I think that it's not surprising I don't know whether you've read Jim fallows book about the press but I've spoken him a few times about he gay he certainly didn't want any friends in Washington I mean he was making it slightly different thesis and that is you know that these big successful journals have been essentially become corrupt and here you have Cokie Roberts getting huge lecture fees from from from the medical industry while she supposedly covering medical questions etc well I certainly agree with those points to I think the news media in Washington has become corrupt has been corrupted it's become corrupt in a variety of ways and also it's become it's become so entrenched and so powerful people do not get voted out of office from the media you'll have your Sam Donaldson's and Cokie Roberts and George wills from you take it from the various sides of the permitted political spectrum here in Washington they're all they're all hanging around and they make lots of money giving these speeches so I wouldn't dispute with what Jim fallows says about that I agree with it but there's also a more a more subtle if you will way in which this works and that is that there can be such pressure placed through personal ridic you'll an attack on individual reporters that they stop doing their jobs or unable to do their jobs and I think that was particularly a problem when Ronald Reagan tried to to protect the Contras through the public diplomacy and other such efforts and it's also it raises questions about Kenda can skin a conservative dominated House of Representatives and for that matter Senate now can it take an honest look at

00:56:00 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEJgPBCf5QY&t=3360s)

Senate now can it take an honest look at the Contras because to look at the Contras honestly and to really expose what they did would also undermine Ronald Reagan's legacy which as you saw if you watch the Republican convention in San Diego the Reagan legacy was a major part of what the Republicans feel about

themselves Reagan was was much more of a star than say George Bush who had a fairly much a cameo appearance so you have sort of take on an issue that might put that legacy in a bad light is very hard for conservative Republicans I suppose it's with your wife Nancy Reagan running around saying just say no and if if history the worm of history turns and it indicates that President Reagan may have created the conditions in which the CIA turned a blind eye to to a contra drug dealing I suppose that is in the worse than Jack Kennedy being found out to have a active extracurricular sex life you know right now and I think I think the Republicans are we have seen the effect on the Democrats from having the Kennedy myth crumble and I think they don't want that to happen with with with with the sort of a legend of their modern legend of a political life Ronald Reagan well I thank you very much for joining us in Los Angeles Robert Perry and I hope to stay in touch thank you bye hello again I'm Ian masters are just speaking there Robert Perry who's the editor of the Consortium for independent journalism and he covered there he broke the original iran-contra story for The Associated Press back in 1985 Madeleine Schwab is the board operator thank you very much Madeline this program has heard live every Sunday at 11:00 it's rebroadcast Monday at 2:00 p.m. I'll be back again next Sunday at 11:00 have a very pleasant week [Music]

END